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HANH, THICH N. (2015). *Silence: The power of quiet in a world full of noise*. New York, NY: HarperOne. 189 pp. ISBN: 9780062224699, Hardcover, \$24.99. Reviewed by Julie Gohman.

The Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, referred to by many people in the Buddhist community as “Thầy,” is perhaps known best for his work as a peace activist and Buddhist monk. However, this Zen master is fast becoming one of the world’s most beloved authors about the art of mindfulness as well. Building on a number of prior publications, such as the classic *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Beacon Press, 1975), and the more recent *Peace is Every Breath* (HarperOne, 2011), Thich Nhat Hanh explores in this new book how to find the silence within ourselves. As he writes, “To be alive and walk on the Earth is a miracle, and yet most of us are running as if there were some better place to get to” (Nhat Hanh, 2015, p. 3). Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us of the freedom and joy that is ours when we stop, breathe, and still our mind; when we stop all the noise and come home to the here and now.

Four Kinds of Food

Thich Nhat Hanh shares in the beginning that in Buddhism there are four kinds of food, the “Four Nutriments” (Nhat Hanh, 2015, p. 25). They are edible food, sense impressions, volition, and consciousness (both individual and collective). Edible food is fairly self-explanatory and easy to understand; it is the food we eat every day. The second food, sense impressions, is the sensory experiences we take in through our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. The third nutriment is volition. Volition means our will, desire and concern and affects our decisions and actions in life. The fourth food is our consciousness, meaning our individual consciousness, as well as the collective consciousness that exists all around us. It is through mindful awareness that we come to see how each of these four nutriments affects us deeply. With every bite we decide whether to put healthy food or junk food into our body. We make the choice to tune into media that is either wholesome or depleting. We have the power to use our time and energy purposefully or just drift along through life. We are the gardeners of our mind. Are we watering the “seed thoughts” that nourish our happiness, or poison our well-being? And we decide, unless circumstances are beyond our control, whether we will surround ourselves with friends, family, art, music, and places in this world that are loving, healing, and uplifting—or toxic, violent, and destructive. Thich Nhat Hanh continually emphasizes that when we have the space and quiet, the silence, to become mindful about making good choices, we discover a powerful source of joy in our lives.

The Internal Dialogue

Thich Nhat Hanh describes the endless internal dialogue that plagues most of us as Radio NST (Non-Stop Thinking). He writes “Cows, goats, and buffalo chew their food, swallow it, then regurgitate and rechew it multiple times. We may not be cows or buffalo, but we ruminate just the same on our thoughts—unfortunately, primarily negative thoughts. We eat them, and then we bring them up to chew again and again, like a cow chewing its cud” (Nhat Hanh, 2015, p. 47). Our thinking goes around and around in circles and actually can do us harm. Just as a candle radiates light, our thoughts are no different, manifesting in our emotions, perceptions, speech, and actions. The answer, according to Thich Nhat Hanh, is not necessarily sitting still on a cushion; rather it comes with one simple in-breath taken in mindfulness. He reminds us that each of us has a choice. If we want to create more peace and less suffering, our first priority should be to find ways to reclaim the spacious silence within ourselves. To this end, Thich Nhat Hanh recommends walking as a wonderful way to clear the mind and stop the blaring noise from Radio NST. We don’t have to call it “walking meditation,” we can just walk slowly and with awareness. To transpersonal psychologists and others who are familiar with mindfulness practices, these suggestions may seem repetitive and simplistic, and yet the wise reader knows that is not the case. It can take a lifetime of practice to walk without letting our thoughts take us out of the present moment. Thich Nhat Hanh manages to breathe fresh air into these concepts by emphasizing the subtle gifts of mindfulness that are often overlooked. Awakening to beauty has the capacity to shift one’s whole perspective on life. Cultivating a calm mind brings a peaceful presence on an individual and communal level. Finding the silence within us makes space for true happiness. With a skillfulness that shows his deep understanding of human nature, Thich Nhat Hanh expands on these aspects of mindfulness in a way that is refreshing to the novice as well as the veteran practitioner.

The French Soldier

In chapter five, Thich Nhat Hanh shares a story from 1947 when he was living as a student at the Buddhist Institute of Bao Quoc Temple. He writes, “At that time the French army occupied the whole region and had set up a military base in Hue. We often had gunfire around us between French and Vietnamese soldiers” (Nhat Hanh, 2015, p. 117). One morning Thich Nhat Hanh (2015) set out over the hills to visit his root temple and was suddenly approached by a young French soldier. “Where are you going?” (p. 119) the soldier asked him. When the young soldier learned that Thich Nhat Hanh could speak French, his face lit up, and he said he only wanted to ask the monk something. “I want to know which temple you’re from” (Nhat Hanh, 2015, p. 119). When Thich Nhat Hanh told him it was Bao Quoc Temple, the soldier pointed to his guard post on the side of the hill, and said, “If you’re not too busy, please come up there with me so we can talk for a little while” (Nhat Hanh, 2015, p. 119).

The French soldier then told Thich Nhat Hanh about a visit he and five other soldiers had made to Bao Quoc Temple ten days earlier in search of Vietminh, the Vietnamese resistors. They were intent on arresting and even killing them if necessary. But what happened when they entered the temple stunned them.

Normally when the soldiers did searches, people would run away in a panic, filled with fear about the terror that may follow. Not so in the Bao Quoc Temple. The oil lamps were turned low and it was incredibly quiet. The young soldier could not hear anyone even though he sensed many people were in the temple. He told Thich Nhat Hanh, “I turned on my flashlight and aimed it into the room we thought was empty—and I saw fifty or sixty monks sitting still and silent in meditation...It was as if we’d run into a strange and invisible force” (Nhat Hanh, 2015, p. 121). Taken aback, the soldiers went out to the courtyard, and waited until a series of bells sounded and normal activity returned to the temple. A monk came out and invited the soldiers inside, but they declined, and took their leave. The young French soldier then told Thich Nhat Hanh about how homesick he was, and about the fear and uncertainty that gripped his heart. He said, “The peaceful and serene life of those monks makes me think about the lives of all human beings on this Earth. And I wonder why we’ve come to this place. What is this hatred between the Vietminh and us that we have traveled all the way over here to fight them?” (Nhat Hanh, 2015, p. 122). Deeply moved, Thich Nhat Hanh shared a story of an old friend, a Vietnamese fighter, who had grappled with the same issues and had come to see the absurdity of the killing and the calamity of war.

After the sun had risen high into the sky, it was time for Thich Nhat Hanh to go. The young French soldier, named Daniel Marty, promised to visit Thich Nhat Hanh at the temple, and they parted with a feeling of understanding between them. In the months that followed, Daniel visited Thich Nhat Hanh at the temple many times, and their friendship became very deep. Daniel was given the name Luong by his new friend, which meant “pure and refreshing peaceful life” (Nhat Hanh, 2015, p. 123). The peace that began to fill his young friend, Daniel, began the night he first entered the temple as a soldier. Thich Nhat Hanh writes, “What made it all possible was that moment of complete and total *stopping* and opening to the powerful, healing, miraculous ocean called silence” (Nhat Hanh, 2015, p. 125).

Despite the fact that Thich Nhat Hanh has written extensively about mindfulness in the past, this new offering represents a beautifully written guidebook for anyone who is in search of finding more happiness, purpose, and peace. Thich Nhat Hanh eloquence and humility shine forth as he combines personal stories, simple techniques, and timeless wisdom with ease, making this book a joy to read for both longtime fans and newcomers alike. I know it is my new favorite!

REFERENCES

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The Author

Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese monk, a renowned Zen master, a poet, and a peace activist. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize by Martin Luther King,

Jr., in 1967, and is the author of many books, including the best-selling *The Miracle of Mindfulness*.

The Reviewer

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